WILLIAM MEIKLE
GREEN GROW
THE RASHES

GREEN GROW THE RASHES
And Other Stories
By
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Green Grow the Rashes

I first saw him in February. Despite the fact that winter still held a tight grip in Newfoundland, the city of St. John's was alive and kicking. We were set up in a bar just off George Street, and the place was packed with drinkers, dancers, drunks and those heading that way fast. Booze flowed, we played ever-faster, and everyone was having a high old time.

And yet…

I felt strangely dissociated from the whole thing. Even the old songs failed to stir me the way they used to. Twenty years of doing the same thing every day will do that to you, whether it be sitting at a desk, driving a bus… or singing in a bar. It was taking more and more booze to oil my gears every night. If Johnny and Dave had noticed, they had kept quiet about it. But that night in St. John's proved to be a turning point.

It started well enough as I made it through *Flowers of the Forest* and *John Barleycorn,* but less than an hour into the gig the whisky I'd been knocking down kicked in. Johnny started the fiddle intro to *Green Grow the Rashes*, Dave came in right on cue on the squeeze-box… and I fumbled the ball, being a full beat late on the first guitar chord. I was an old hand at winging it, so the general audience scarcely noticed, but I saw the look that passed between the two others with me on the small stage.

I had enough pride left in me to feel embarrassed. I turned away from their stares… and that's when I saw him. I say him, but it was some time afterwards before I was able to discern a gender. That first night it was just a darker shadow in a corner, but one that seemed to draw my eye, one that gained *depth* and presence as I sang the old song.

There's nought but care on every hand,
In every hour that passes.

I'd sang the same song a thousand, two thousand, times, but that night was the first in a long time that I *felt* it, and understood. Emotion poured through and out of me and I gave myself to it wholeheartedly. The song rose high and pure. I became aware that Johnny and Dave had stopped playing

The worldly race may riches chase,
And riches still may fly them, O,
And tho' at last they catch them fast,
Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O.

I had tears streaming down my face by now. The audience stood, mouths gaping, all eyes, most of them wet like mine, staring at me. I

put one final push into it and brought the song to an end.

The applause nearly lifted the roof off the old bar. The darker shadow in the corner shifted. I peered, trying to see who was there, then Dave clapped me on the arm, handed me a beer, and the spell was broken.

~-o0O0o-~

It was a busy tour, and we were booked every night. We played most all of the settlements on the Irish loop, pushed the old van too hard over the long schlep to Gros Morne and back, and had three riotous nights in Clarenville. There was no recurrence of the *magic* I had felt that night in St. John's. Indeed, the *black dog* had settled in me again, and I'm afraid I took to the drink rather more heavily than I should have.

It was the rear end of March before we got back to St. John's and I didn't know whether to be happy or worried that we were to return to the same venue. I was even less pleased when Johnny and Dave had a word with me at the bar before we went on.

"Could you try to hold off on the hard stuff for the first hour, maybe two?" Johnny said. He laughed, but I saw it in his eyes… he was deadly serious. And so was Dave.

"Just don't screw up," he said. Any other time I might have argued the toss, but I knew in my heart that they were right… I just didn't know whether I wanted to do anything about it.

But I tried, I really did. I got to the midway point in the set with only a couple of beers to tide me over. But an exuberant fan wanted to buy me a whisky at the interval. He made it a double, and another, and I was half cut by the time we started again. I'd got through *Flowers of the Forest* and we were half way in to *John Barleycorn* before I realised that we hadn't changed our set order. *The song*… that's how I thought of it… was up next. I'd been singing it at all our gigs with no problems at all, but now that we were back in this bar it started to get to me… so much so that I forgot a verse of *Barleycorn*. That got me another of *those* looks from Dave when the song came to an early end.

"We can skip straight to *The Haughs of Cromdale* if you want?" Johnny said.

I might even have agreed, had not my gaze been caught by a gathering shadow in the corner. This time I could almost make him out… a stocky figure, with bushy hair and a straggly beard, almost as dark as the shadows in which he stood. Somehow just looking at him brought the *magic* back. I didn't want a drink, didn't want to be anywhere else but right there, on that stage. And there was only one thing I wanted to sing.

I surprised both Johnny and Dave by starting right in without accompaniment. The audience fell quiet after just two bars. All that could be heard was my voice, soaring, dancing and filling the room with both joy and sadness at the same time. The shadow in the corner deepened and took firmer shape.

There's nought but care on every hand,

In every hour that passes.

I *felt* those cares, as if I'd borne them all my life. Tears came again. I let them come, and put everything I had into the song.

And tho' at last they catch them fast,

Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O.

As I brought it to an end the place was deathly quiet. All I could hear was my own breathing. Then the crowd erupted in applause that seemed to go on forever. Dave and Johnny both wore huge grins. But they soon faded when I stepped down off the stage.

"What about *The Haughs of Cromdale?*" Johnny shouted. I ignored him and headed for the shadowed corner. I had to force my way through a crowd who all wanted to pat me on the back, buy me a drink, give me a kiss, anything to get close to the bearer of *the song.* Over their heads I caught a glimpse of a shifting shadow, a sense of something *green* moving deeper into the darkness. When I reached the corner I found only empty space. I turned on my heels and headed for the bar, ignoring the shouts and exhortations coming from Johnny and Dave.

By the time they had finished the set and came to berate me, I was far too drunk to care.

~-o0O0o-~

In the morning I woke to find them gone. I couldn't even remember where our next stop was to be. There was a bird involved in the place name, that I knew, but whether it was Gander, or Happy Valley Goose Bay, I had no idea. Not that it mattered, for I had no intention of following them. All I wanted was to find the man who had stood in that dark corner; find him, and learn how to bring up the emotion that was too deeply buried to find at any other time.

I spent the rest of the day in the bar, supping beer and casting looks into the corner. Several patrons tried to engage me in conversation, mostly about *the song*, but a couple of grunts soon put paid to that, and eventually I was left alone with my beer and my memories. All too soon I was back on the hard stuff again.

And so it went, through a long afternoon that turned into a fuzzy evening.

I had been good, once upon a time, a lifetime ago. I left Scotland

in my twenties with the voice of an angel and the confidence to send it out to any audience who would listen. I played gigs all over North America, to ever-bigger crowds, ever bigger acclaim. I met Jennie, and we did all of that, but together.

Then she went and died on me. My voice shrank, and so did the crowds, and my life got smaller, circling Newfoundland in a decrepit van, singing the same songs every night, and drinking, always drinking. I had thought I was as dead as my love. The man in the shadow had shown me different. And I hated him for it.

I only shook myself out of my reverie when the night's entertainment started up -- a band of youngsters, musically gifted, but with about as much heart as a lump of wood. I left them to it and headed for the washroom. To do so I had to pass by the shadowed corner.

He was there again, a darker blackness but recognisable as the same stout man from the night before.

"Hey!" I called out, and headed in his direction. But as I closed on him, so he seemed to slide away from me. I followed the shifting shadow, around the wall of the bar and out, into a biting cold night.

~-o0O0o-~

It had been snowing again, only a light fall, but enough for me to see his footsteps, leading away. They were strangely short and wide, and left what looked like flecks of rotting vegetation in the prints, but I didn't have time to stop and look, for although he was stout he was also fast, heading off at speed to the south away from the town center.

I followed as quickly as I was able. The booze was taking its toll on me, and I could scarce manage more than a stumbling waddle. The shadowy figure was soon lost out of sight. I stumbled on for a while, following his footprints in the snow, but soon even they became confused with the prints of others that had passed this way. I slumped, exhausted against a wall.

~-o0O0o-~

Then I heard it, a high clear tenor singing *the song*.

The worldly race may riches chase,
And riches still may fly them, O,
And tho' at last they catch them fast,
Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O.

I followed the sound, and entered a cemetery, an old one by the feel of it, with overgrown rose bushes and ivy encrusted walls. The

song stopped as soon as I stepped into the grounds. There was a figure, a bent, hunched over, man in the left-hand corner. I called out to him.

"Hello?"

There was no reply. I heard a noise, crackling and a rustling, but there was no sign that I had been heard. I moved closer, noticing that the figure was the one I had been following. He was stocky, with a mass of bushy hair and even bushier beard. In the light under the trees he looked almost green.

"Probably the gardener," I thought. As I got within five yards I spoke again.

"Hello?"

But there was still no reply. I went to the figure's side and touched his shoulder, then stood back as he turned round. He just didn't *look* green. He *was* green, his skin more like the bark of a tree than flesh, his beard bristling and firm like new pine needles. Two deep black eyes were sunk into hollows but they sparkled with life.

The worst thing was the mouth - I couldn't take my eyes off it. The lips were thin, almost non-existent and they were pulled back over red, feverish gums in which three brown teeth sat, spaced at intervals in the rotting tissue. The tongue that popped out when he looked up at me was also green and somehow slimy.

I looked down at the rest of him. Suddenly I found it hard to breathe and the world swam mistily around me. I had to shake my head, hard, and look again, just to make sure.

In his left hand the man had a pointed stick of black, moss encrusted wood. He pointed at a leaf, a brown leaf from last year's fall. As I watched it started to go green, from the edges first, a yellowing then a darkening spreading inwards along the veins, crackling and rustling as the leaf unfurled and stretched, before falling to the ground. I looked down to see roots running in frenzy at my feet like a slithering nest of snakes. All around us new growth rose up from the dead brown soil.

The stick pointed again, this time at a rose bush. Leaves sprouted and opened. I didn't know why, but I found that I was crying. When I looked up again the squat figure had wandered off, over into the center of the cemetery.

I followed. As I got closer I saw that the figure had bent over a pool. I heard cooing noises coming from the festering hole which passed as a mouth. I saw a fish glide in the water and the man point the stick.

"No" I shouted, just before my world changed.

He looked round at me, and pointed at my chest. I felt emotion well up inside me, and unbidden, the song came. I stood there in the

middle of the cemetery and sang until my heart seemed to bleed.

There's nought but care on every hand,
In every hour that passes.

The green man waved the stick in time, as if conducting me in the song, and smiled a huge grin that showed his teeth as I finished. Then he did something even more remarkable than anything I had already seen. He pointed the stick at himself, then at me, and repeated the action. Every time he did so, I felt emotion rise and fall inside me, like the swell of the ocean.

He pointed at the green shoots on the ground, then at me, backward and forward, and he raised a bushy eyebrow in a question.

I was not exactly sure what was being asked of me, but I knew one thing and knew it well; I wanted to feel that swelling, that life…I wanted it more than anything.

I nodded.

~-o0O0o-~

Several things happened at once. He passed me the stick. At the same moment I looked to the ground to see that both his legs seemed to have sunk deep into the soil. White roots slithered across his whole lower torso. The stick writhed in my hand and I felt a slight pain as it too took root, nestling in my palm as if it had been grown there. Green veins spread up my arm and I smiled as a new beard sprouted on my chin.

The green man smiled in return, even as the roots tugged violently at him and his body fell apart into a moist brown loam that quickly turned green.

The song rose up in me and could not be contained. I walked through the cemetery, singing and waving the stick in time.

But give me a cannie hour at even,
My arms around my dearie, O,
An' worldly cares and worldly men,
May all go tapsalteerie, O!

Spring followed behind me.

Out of the Black

Ten short years.

That's how long we have. The ore that gives us light, keeps us warm, and runs the food plants has finally come to an end. Three hundred and fifty years after the dimming. A good run.

But not long enough. Not by my reckoning. I'm only twelve points short of my breeding merit. There's no way I'm checking out of here before then.

So I volunteered. "Exploration duty", that's what they call it. "Suicide", Tom Draper said. "Escape", Linda whispered in my ear the night before I left.

As it turns out, all three were right in their own way.

~-o0O0o-~

It started well enough, despite my apprehension at heading out. The flyer they gave me hadn't been upside for thirty years; nobody had. Too cold, too dark, no point. Until now. I had to wait for two days while the bots fitted an ore probe and a drill and that just gave me more time to fret. I was actually happy when I strapped in and took the flyer into the tube.

The five-minute ascent to Hell soon put paid to that.

I felt cold before we got halfway up. Of course I knew about Hell. No light for three hundred years, thirty foot thick ice shelves and no life bigger than a patch of lichen. I *knew* that. I just didn't realise what it meant in real terms.

At least the flyer had a heater. I pushed it up to *Full* and it still wasn't going to be enough. We punched through to the surface a minute later and I immediately forgot about the cold.

They'd taught me about Hell. But they hadn't mentioned the sky. A carpet of stars hung from horizon to horizon - a glittering jewel that had remained unseen for decades. I felt humbled in the face of such immensity. More than that, the open space filled me with such dread that I had to lower my eyes, unused as they are to looking at anything more than ten feet away.

I switched on the ore probe and let it run. I had nothing to do for hours now except hang there in the sky and try to ignore the stars that now seemed to be falling ever closer, threatening to wrap themselves around me, engulf me and drag me off to the black beyond.

I say this to give you some idea of my thought processes in those early hours. I know I am speaking of things you have been taught,

things you have seen on the holovids for most of your lives. But nothing has prepared you for what is out there, what must be faced if we are to survive the time that is left to us. It is vast, it is empty, and it does not care.

It just does not care.

~-o0O0o-~

I had music turned up loud for most of the next few hours. It seemed to help, to stop the oppressive sky from beating me down into the ice that lay everywhere below me. I almost didn't hear the *beep* as the probe announced a finding.

I checked the co-ordinates and my heart sank. It was a four-hour flight away. I wasn't sure my mind could take so much open space, so much desolation. Then I remembered.

Ten short years. And twelve points short of my breeding merit.

I set my eyes on the brightest star, and told the probe to go.

I tried to let my mind wander, to think of happier times in the warren, of solid walls and enough light to keep the dark at bay permanently. But my eye kept drawing me back to that star, a bright pinpoint. At first I thought it might be one of the planets, before I remembered that, without a star to light them, they too had gone mostly dark. I realised that I was looking at Sol itself… or what was left of her after the dimming.

You've all seen the history vids, you all know of the great golden ball that some days seemed to fill the sky. And I know that some of you harbour thoughts that it's still up there, hanging above, and that we will walk underneath its heat again.

I wish I could show you that sad little point of light that is all that remains; I wish I could make you see just how far the dark has encroached since we went under. I flew over the desolation for hours. We know from our lessons that we went to ground where we hoped to be hottest. Iceland they used to call it, a place of hot springs and abundant thermal energy. Or so we thought. The dimming changed all of that; not quickly, but three hundred years without heat is a long time. And Iceland now lives up to its name.

There is no sea.

I'll repeat that, for it is something we have forgotten. We see the pictures, of waves crashing on sandy shores, and smiling people walking hand in hand under open sky. Never again. There is ice, pack ice, and rock. Nothing else.

I headed south and west. Again the history tells of cities, tall mighty monuments to our past. They are all gone. The ice has eaten everything. The history of mankind has gone cold. More than halfway

into my journey I crossed what had been the Equator, what had been lush greenery. All gone. The whole planet has gone cold.

That was my thought and I saw nothing to make me change my mind.

Until I reached my destination.

~-o0O0o-~

And here I must take more care over my words. There are no histories that mention what I must tell, no pictures I can show you. Only what I have seen with my own eyes, and if I am to impress you with urgency, I must be clear in my intent.

The flyer told me I was somewhere in the South Pacific. It looked little different to the spot where I had come upside, but as we descended I saw that the ice here was less compacted. Several darker patches showed. As I got closer, I could see there were stretches of broken ice and slush. I started to think there might even be open water available. The probe beeped a proximity alert warning as the flyer hovered ten feet above an island of rock, black against the ice all around.

There was ore here, and a lot of it. The scan showed a seam, some one hundred feet deep in the rock. I quickly spotted that I would have to land and drill to get proof, for if the deposit was as large as it seemed to be, then more flyers would be needed to carry it back below to where it was needed.

I put the flyer down on the flattest spot I could find. I did not need to get out to supervise the drilling; the on-board bot handled that. But I could not come all this way to merely sit in a bubble. Even despite the glowering stars overhead, my curiosity won over my fear. I put on a helmet and ventured outside, aware even as I did so that I was probably the first human to walk above ground for three centuries.

I had to turn up the suit heater after just two steps. The helmet told me I had two hours power left, but I wasn't worried. I just wanted a short walk, just enough to be able to brag about it back in the warren.

The only sound was the steady grinding of drill on rock. My heads-up told me that the strata being drilled was sedimentary on top of schist, the drill currently penetrating rock that was over two hundred million years old, and going through a million years of sediment a second.

All of which was secondary to the fact that I had just found a cave.

~-o0O0o-~

The heads up told me that drilling would take another thirty minutes. And with the heater turned up full, I was cosy enough, despite the outside temperature of minus 65, a figure which meant nothing to me. Besides, I could always rationalise my decision to enter the cave mouth by telling myself I needed some respite from the lowering stars in the sky above.

I stepped into the darkness, and got a sudden fright when my helmet switched on a bright light to show me the way. I felt my heart pound in my ears and had to steady myself to quell the impulse to flee. But two more steps took me in to the cave proper, and I almost felt at home. The walls were smooth, some weathering process over the millennia was my assumption, and the light from the helmet was bright enough to light my way for twenty yards ahead. The cave floor sloped downwards, and as I proceeded the temperature rose. It was when it reached minus four that I was given pause for thought.

I might have discovered much more than just a source of ore. There was obviously heat here. And plenty of it.

I went in further.

Fifty yards in I had to turn off the suit heater. I also got the first indication that this was more than a simple cave. I found a number imprinted on the wall. It read:

SUB LEVEL 25.

The passageway was man made.

As you can imagine, my heart rate was elevated as I went in further. We know from our history that we were not the only ones to go under; indeed we were communicating with some of the others for the best part of a century. But there has been no contact for more than two hundred years. The thought I might be close to meeting another human being made me descend even faster.

There was still no sound beyond the increasingly distant grind of the drill searching for ore. Neither was there any light beyond what my helmet provided. But it kept getting warmer. The heads-up told me there was only the thinnest of atmosphere beyond my visor, but it felt almost as if I walked a corridor in the warren.

I came to a junction and chose the right hand fork, heading deeper into the system.

I found the first corpse seconds later.

~-o0O0o-~

We are inured against death by our merit procedures. That, and the walk to the chamber when our time has come, means I have lived

my whole life in the warren without seeing a dead person.

It is not pretty.

Pieces of dried skin hung in flaps from white bone. I was so appalled that it took me seconds to spot the important fact. The dead man had not been wearing a suit. He had died while there was still an atmosphere in the cave system.

Not being an expert, I had no way of telling how long ago that might have been, but judging by the decomposition of the clothing, I guessed that many years had passed.

I kept going, but I was no longer convinced I would meet anyone yet alive.

The corridor opened into a wider chamber, an eating area of sorts.

Bodies lay strewn everywhere, lying on mounds or pairs. Skeletal arms were wrapped around broken necks, skulls showed signs of having been bashed in against tabled and floor. They had all killed each other in a frenzied melee.

As I bent to inspect the closest, I saw the cause.

The darkness danced in their eye-sockets, a deeper shadow. It was full of stars where the sky had fallen in and got them.

The more I looked, the more I saw it; there in the shadow where a body hung over an overturned chair, there in the corner under the food processors, but mostly in the eyes, dancing and twinkling, mocking my horror.

I stumbled past more bodies than I could count, searching for a reason, an answer as to what had happened. The empty eyes followed me everywhere I went. There was a door opposite me, and I went through, hoping for some small escape from the terror.

~-o0O0o-~

I recognised where I was. The corridor structure almost exactly mirrored the structure of the warren here. Indeed, I began to fear for my sanity, thinking I had inadvertently returned home to find you all dead, all taken. There were no bodies in this part of the system, just long empty corridors, but that somehow only made matters worse.

I went deeper.

Although I was still safe inside the suit, the air seemed somehow thicker here, more oppressive; a faint trace of blue mist hanging in the air. If I were home, I knew I would be approaching the bionic plant. Despite the terrors of the eating area above, I was almost eager to visit the working parts of the site, as there may even be something salvageable there, something that would further prolong our own time here in the warren.

I descended a stairwell and walked out into their bionics plant.

Scores of pairs of eyes turned and looked at me, reflecting like twinkling stars in my helmet light.

~-o0O0o-~

They had once been human, that much was obvious. What was equally obvious was that they had not been so for some time. The skin was pale, almost translucent, their eyes large, like saucers in heads too small to hold them. They scrambled, on all fours, amid a pile of slurry that seemed thicker in places.

I gagged when I saw the first rib cage, the first thighbone.

They started to crawl towards me, piteously mewling like hungry kittens. Stars danced in their eyes.

I fled.

~-o0O0o-~

I will not tell of my flight from that place, save to say that I have deleted the co-ordinates from the systems. If you want the ore, you will have to send out another flyer.

But I would advise against it, for the darkness will come back with them. The sky will fall, and your eyes will fill with stars. The darkness will get inside, and it will consume you, as it did to those poor things in the bionics lab… as it has started to do to me.

It is vast, it is empty, and it does not care.

It just does not care.

The Sweller in the Dress Hold

"So what are you reading this time?"

Robin Fraser put out his cigarette and looked up from his book into the smiling face of Tom, drinking partner, friend and, most importantly at this point in time, foreman.

He gave back an equally large grin as he turned the book around to show Tom Delaney the cover.

"How to see the world on five dollars a day."

"And what would you be wanting to see the world for?" Tom said, his heavy Irish brogue coming through thickly. "Sure and don't the docks bring the world to you, every day, and for less and five bucks?"

Robin thought hard about the answer. He'd lived in this city all his life, all twenty years of it. Up until this year he had wanted no more. He had many good friends, he had a good job, and Friday nights in the bar were just fine. Tom was partially right. Working in the docks had brought the world to him.

But lately the wanderlust had grown in him and he often looked out along the river and wondered. Recently every day, he found himself wondering a little bit more.

"You know how it is Tom," he said. "A young man's got to sow his oats while he can."

The older man laughed at that.

"Sowing oats now is it? And what would a lad from the Bronx know about oats? Now come on. Are we going to get some work done or are you going to sit there all day?"

Robin had to stretch his back as he stood, both hands pressed tight to the base of his spine as if he could push the pain away.

"So what is it today?" he asked the foreman. "More electronic goodies from Japan? Or is it ideologically sound timber from Brazil?"

"No," Tom said, and there was a wicked gleam in his eyes. "You're going to like this one. It's fruit. Bananas. From the West Indies. You know, where the really big spiders come from?"

Robin groaned.

"Oh, come on. Can't you put me on the crane, just for today?"

Tom grinned. "Oh, no. Today you get to muck in with the rest of us. Besides - you wanted something exotic didn't you? There's bound to be something lurking in the boxes that'll ease your curiosity. And don't worry about the state of the boat," he said, hawking a lump of phlegm on the quay. "I've seen worse."

Robin's unease wasn't lessened by the sight of the boat as it docked. How such combinations of rust and rotting wood made it up

the coast was always a source of wonder, and this was one of the worst. Even the barnacles on the hull seemed old and decrepit and Robin had to struggle to read the name on the stern through the rust and peeling paint.

At first he thought the boat had been aptly named as ‘The Dross’, but then he saw the accompanying sketch, the red silk material cunningly wrought to billow in the sea wind. He finally made out the real name. The boat was ‘The Dress’, out of Haiti, registered in 1936.

Robin could already imagine the hot sultry depths of the hold, could imagine the rustlings in the dark corners behind the crates. Despite the bright morning sunshine he felt a cold shiver creep up his spine.

The coldness seeped in further as he stepped up the gangplank under the sullen gaze of the boat’s crew. To a man they stared at him, cold, empty stares, as if they were looking through him and beyond to some far distance.

Robin and Tom made their way to the hold in silence, and it wasn’t until they were under the decks and out of sight of the crew that they felt able to speak.

Tom was the first to break the silence.

"I wouldn’t want to spend any time with that lot."

"I know what you mean," Robin replied. "It was almost as if they didn’t want us aboard." Robin looked around as he spoke. "And there’s none of them down here to help us."

Tom had lost all of his natural good humour.

"Let’s get the job done and get out of here. Jim should have the crane in place by now anyway."

They walked in silence along the dim corridor, their footsteps muffled by the dampness that oozed from the walls around them. A heavy, meaty odour hung in the air, like a wet dog that had just rolled in a cowpat. Robin felt it catch at the back of his throat and had to swallow hard to keep down his breakfast. When he spoke his words echoed mockingly back at him, forcing him to drop his voice to a whisper.

"How the hell can they live like this, travel like this? Surely they didn’t come all the way up from the Carib with the boat in this state?"

The older man shrugged.

"I’ve seen worse," was all he said as he pushed open the door to the hold.

The smell got worse. Much worse, and Robin had to breathe deeply through his mouth. He was sure his nasal passages would burn to a frazzle if he let any of that stench up his nose.

He was about to say something when he realised that Tom had stopped. The older man stared at the boxes in the hold.

"Christ on a bike," the older man said, letting out a low whistle. "Would you look at the state of that."

The cargo was bananas… or might have been once.

Now it was overripe mush, the slimy juices running sickly from the crates, the black skins discarded throughout the hold like a nest of withered snakes. The smell tickled at Robin's tonsils, reminding him of babies nappies and toilets in baseball grounds.

"Surely they don't want us to shift this lot?" he asked, hoping, but not believing, that Tom would refuse the job.

"That's what we get paid for son," the older man said. "If you wanted a clean job you should've gone to college. Come on, let's get stuck in. You can have a shower later."

There was a harsh grinding overhead and the hold's hatch slid aside. Robin hoped for some more light, enough to dispel the dark corners. But what little sunlight did penetrate the hold only accentuated the mess. It glinted off the slime and cast the shadows deeper in all the wrong places.

Tom whistled, a high pitch squeal that echoed loudly around them. The crane hummed out on the dock as it started up.

"You start stacking," Tom said. "I'll make sure the boxes get fixed to the pallets. We don't want any of this stuff falling on the dockside."

For the first five minutes Robin cleared the centre of the hold, stacking the boxes in neat piles on the pallets. Soon he was going to have to move into the darker corners, into the places where the smell would be thicker and there would be scurrying things in the darkness - mice, rats, and just possibly, spiders.

He moved reluctantly out of the light and stood for several seconds, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. Behind him the crane rattled as it took away another pallet. Here in the corner of the hold the smell clung to the back of his throat, thick and foetid, almost chewable. As he moved forward, he tried to breathe as shallowly as possible.

The rest of the crates sat in a deep puddle of black shadow and Robin approached gingerly, ready to jump at the first untoward movement.

Silence fell around him like a shroud. All he could hear was the thin whistle of his own breath and the squeak of his shoes against the steel plates of the floor.

He put his left hand on to the nearest box.

It sank in, then further. His hand, even his wrist were enveloped in hot, damp, rotting fruit. Disgusted, he pulled his hand from the mush, a bit too quickly, overbalancing the stacked boxes and sending them crashing to the floor with a moist, muffled, thud.

"Damn," he whispered under his breath, then clamped his mouth

shut as the echoes whispered around him.

The shadow in the corner darkened. Darker and bigger, the blackness of it filled the whole corner of the hold. There in the darkness, winking suddenly into existence like sudden flames, sat two red eyes, boggling and swivelling, piercing Robin with their gaze.

He stepped back.

The eyes watched him.

Something slithered in the corner, and the smell got so bad that he lost his breakfast in one hot steaming bundle. The blackness loomed over him, swelling to fill the hold. The red eyes flared and burned.

Robin turned and ran, his footsteps echoing loudly around him.

He lined himself up with the exit, closed his eyes and sprinted, faster then he had ever moved in his life. He only got ten yards before he ran into something soft and yielding. He only realised he was screaming when he got slapped, hard on his face.

"What the hell's the matter with you lad?" Tom's gruff voice said.

It was hard to do, but Robin managed to open his eyes. Tom stood in front of him, angry, but also concerned.

"There's something in there - something foul," Robin said, trying to get past the older man. He was held strong by an iron grip.

"Scared of the dark are you son?" That's not going to get you very far in this job. Come on… show me what the problem is."

Robin struggled but Tom got him turned round and frog marched him backwards, back towards the shadows.

"We can't have all this carry-on you know," Tom said. "The boss would go crazy if…"

His voice trailed away as the blackness in the corner shifted and the smell got exponentially worse. Something lumbered out of the shadows towards them.

It had once been a man. That much was obvious, from the distended torso to the great, pumpkin-like bulk of the head. Yellow fibrous skin covered the body, folds and swathes of it, blackened, rotten and somehow slimy. As the thing moved large patches sloughed off, casting streams of fermenting fluid to the floor.

The smell was so bad that Robin's eyes watered, thankfully obscuring his vision. It wasn't enough to cut off the noise though - the moist slithering as the creature came closer.

Robin's legs felt rooted to the spot. His brain sent signals to all parts, but none of them responded. He only stood there, tears mingling with the painful streaming in his eyes as he waited for the creature to reach them.

Tom had other ideas. An ear-splitting whistle almost punctured

Robin’s ear-drums and the old man grabbed him by the shoulders, hard.

"Just walk backwards - slowly," Tom whispered, never taking his eyes from the creature in front of them.

At first Robin couldn’t move, then he heard the sound that got him going… the rattling of chains as the winch was started up out on the dock side. He made sure that he kept a firm grip on Tom as they slowly shuffled backwards, back towards the sunlight.

Robin’s eyes cleared, but he soon wished they hadn’t.

The creature followed them, dragging itself out of the corner, revealing more of its vast bulk.

As it moved it pulsed in great rhythmic waves and with each wave it grew, threatening to fill the whole hold.

Robin screamed as the skin split with a moist slither. A red maw opened, lips black and festering. Inside the maw any skeleton that had once been there was broken and fractured, the bones pointing inwards like twin rows of fangs.

Robin and Tom inched back into the sole splash of sunlight. Robin risked a look upwards and cried with relief. The crane’s chain hung only two feet above him.

But the creature had seen it too. A wave ran over its body and the maw screamed, sending shudders throughout the boat.

Above them the crew started chanting, but Robin didn’t have time to appreciate it.

"Jump," Tom shouted, and, with almost the same breath let out another whistle. They leapt simultaneously, both grabbing for the chain. Robin had a bad moment when his grip slipped but then Tom caught him one-handed and dragged him upwards just as the chain started to rise.

Tom let out a whoop of triumph, but he was premature. Deep in the hold beneath them something shifted and flowed. Robin felt a tugging at his feet. He looked down and the shock almost made him lose his grip.

The thing following them out of the hole, stretching and thickening as the maw reached for them. Robin kicked out, hard, and had the satisfaction of seeing one of the rib bones break and fall backwards into the churning mass of the creature’s innards.

Small lesions burst on the things skin, black pustules like volcanoes sending a fine spray of yellow flesh into the air around them.

The chanting got louder as Tom and Robin were raised higher. The fleshy growth made one last lunge at them, and Robin had to raise his legs sharply. Even then he was almost pulled down as a shard of bone snagged on his denims and pulled.

The strain increased. Something ripped and tore. The creature finally fell away from beneath then with a squeal of loss.

Robin had to concentrate on his grip as they were swung away from the boat and towards the astonished gaze of the crane driver.

The driver lowered them quickly to the quayside. Robin turned to look back at the boat, but little of the vessel was visible. The slimy growth surged out from the hold and engulfed the superstructure. Some members of the crew struggled, knee, then hip, deep in the fibrous matter. The maw stretched further. It swallowed the crew even as they screamed.

"Stand aside lad," Tom said.

Robin had to move quickly as Tom rolled an oil drum across the dock towards the stricken ship.

"Get another of these open son," Tom shouted as he passed. "We're going to need a fire… a big fire."

By the time Robin got an oil drum open Tom was back at his side. Over Tom's right shoulder Robin saw that the beast had already started to flop over the side of the Dress and dripped globules of steaming flesh on the quay.

Together Robin and Tom kicked over the oil drum and pushed it away so that it rolled towards the Dress leaving a trail of fuel behind it.

"Your lighter son… where is it?" Tom said. "Time to put it to good use."

Robin knelt.

Just as he lit the trail of oil, the maw stretched out from the boat and took the first oil drum deep into its body.

"Burn!" Robin shouted as a line of fire ran across the dock.

The flames reached the leaking oil drum.

The Dress, and everything on it, went up in one roaring, deafening blast that rocked the dock and sent Robin and Tom flying.

When they picked themselves up the boat already listed badly. It sank in a flush of steam, leaving behind swathes of smoking flesh that quickly blackened and burst.

"What was that?" Robin asked, struggling to keep the tremor from his voice, never taking his gaze away from the steaming ruin of the boat. "What the hell was that?"

The older man didn't speak, merely shaded his eyes and stared at the ruined vessel.

He took Robin by the arm and led him away.

"I don't know what it was son," Tom said. "But I'll tell you one thing… you'll see worse."

Jim McLeod waved to the departing dinghy but old Joe didn't wave back and in less than a minute the Zodiac was lost from sight round the headland.

"You'll be OK on your own," Joe had said as he left. It hadn't been a question. Jim stood on the jetty, conflicting thoughts running through his mind. Of course he was proud that Joe thought him capable enough of running the light on his own. But that had to be balanced against the fact that he faced the prospect of two nights on his own on this lump of rock with only the North Atlantic weather for company.

Still, it couldn't be helped.

The call had come through just an hour ago. Joe's wife had been taken to hospital. The old man had taken a bit of coaxing but eventually Jim had got him into the dinghy.

"It's probably nothing," the old man said.

"That's true," Jim replied. "But you'd never forgive yourself if it's more than that. Away wi' you. I'll be fine here."

Joe took his time preparing, and Jim caught him looking at the radio, expecting a call that would tell him the three-hour trip across the Minch wouldn't be required. But no call had come, and finally the old man had bowed to the inevitable and headed off at speed.

He'd only been gone two minutes, and already Jim found the quiet pressing in on him, an almost physical presence. To make matters worse, a front hung offshore and was rolling in fast. By the time Jim walked up the jetty and into the old lighthouse rain had started to patter on the cobbles and darkness was gathering.

He went inside and shut the weather out. The first order of business was to get the light started. He almost ran up the stairs to the light room.

Beyond the glass everything was awash, the rain running in a flat sheet down the window like a huge water feature. Jim switched on the light and the horn. Up here the noise was almost deafening. He had turned away at the second *woot* to go back downstairs, when an answering noise came from out to the west. He wasn't really sure he'd heard it at all… it had sounded like chanting.

He strained to see through the glass, but there was only watery grayness beyond. He put his nose up against the window. As if from the far distance he heard it again, the sound of a choir joined in singing.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

Jim backed away fast. His heartbeat thudded in his ears. When

the horn went off he almost jumped in the air. He was halfway down the stairs almost before he realized it. He stopped, putting out a hand on the wall to steady himself.

He managed a bitter laugh.

Old Joe is barely gone ten minutes and I'm jumping at shadows already. Pull yourself together man.

Going back down to the living quarters grounded him back in a place he could relax. The noise of the horn was slightly dampened here, and if he *thought* he heard the chanting again, it was soon drowned out when he switched on the radio. Jim made himself a coffee and sat down with his book. The intricacies of the thriller soon drew him in and he was surprised to look up and notice that the light was going.

Now that his attention was pulled out of the book he noticed other things. The wind was up outside, whistling like a tone-deaf pensioner around the old window frames. The rain threw drum roll patterns against the glass, like frantic Morse code messages. A rogue wave hit the rocks outside with a thunderous crash and once again Jim jumped.

Old Joe would think me daft.

It was time to check on the light. He didn't want to venture anywhere near the light room, but duty was duty, and he owed it to Joe.

He went up the stairs slowly. The higher he went the louder came the sound of the horn. And even from halfway up the staircase he heard the rain lash against the glass.

His round of the light room was cursory. On another night he might linger, enjoying the play of light on water, or even, on nights like this one, enjoying the sheer brutal force of the storm. But the chanting had got him spooked. While he was downstairs he was able to pass it off as a trick of the wind, but up here the chill he'd felt came back again.

Once more he headed for the stairs and safety.

The chant came in on a perfect beat between the period of the horn.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

It was closer this time, a mixture of timbres and voices that echoed and thrummed through the whole fabric of the lighthouse. Jim's legs wanted to run, but the sound was *too* close, *too* impossible.

Joe would want me to check.

He opened the door and stepped out onto the platform around the outside.

He immediately regretted it. The wind tugged at him, trying to throw him to the rocks below, and the rain drenched him. He sidled

round, keeping his back to the glass all the way. The wind raged less wildly on the far side of the light, and the building itself protected him from the worst of the rain. Jim was able to shuffle closer to the rail and, hanging on tight, risked a look over.

Waves blasted at the rocks below, foam flying over the jetty that was usually twelve feet above the water line. Something was lying on the cobbles there, and for a moment Jim couldn't breathe. The dark figure looked like a body, still and unmoving.

Then he saw the heads of the others bobbing in the water. A group of gray seals were swimming in the relative safety of the small harbor in front of the lighthouse. As he watched two more dragged themselves out onto the cobbles of the jetty.

They raised their heads and looked up, straight at Jim.

The chant came again.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

Jim turned and ran.

He was back in the living quarters with a whisky bottle in his hand less than a minute later. But even through the thick oak door he could still hear the chanting. He turned the radio up full.

That's better.

He poured himself a large measure and downed half of it in one gulp, letting the heat burn down to the pit of his stomach -- letting it remind him he was alive.

The words of the chant kept going round and round in his mind.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

He fired up his laptop. His searches didn't tell him much at first. He found the translation quickly enough.

Drop down dew ye heavens from above, and let the clouds rain the Just One.

A search for *The Just One* proved less fruitful. Until he factored in their location. The article was the first thing returned.

"St Brennan's Abbey is now little more than a ruin, but in its day it was the focus of one of the biggest religious trials in history. Twelve monks, long time residents of the island, were found guilty of heresy. They had renounced Christ and instead had turned to worshipping a being they said lived in the seas around the island, a being they called "The Just One".

The storm went up a notch. All the lights flickered and Jim's heart jumped into his mouth. But the lights stayed on, as did the radio. He went back to the article.

Found guilty, the monks were sentenced to be burned at the stake, but they escaped that fate when a great storm hit. The roof of the Abbey itself fell in. When the storm was over, the monks were nowhere to be found. But local legend says that they can be heard, in the wind, singing their prayers to their watery god. The identity of this god is subject to much

conjecture but…"

The lights went out. Jim fumbled in the dark for several seconds. The wind howled, and through it, the chant rose, high and loud.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

Peccavimus, et facti sumus tamquam immundus nos, et cecidimus quasi folium universi.

Something banged at the oak door, hard. He heard the old wood creak. An involuntary *squirt* of piss ran down his leg inside his trousers.

Move you idiot.

He'd just found the dresser, and the candles, when the backup generator kicked in. He heard the rumble of the diesel engine rise up from the cellar below him.

Sorry Joe. I'd forgotten all about that.

The radio switched back on suddenly, giving him near as big a fright as the chanting.

He stood there for a while, waiting for his heart to calm, letting the sound of forties' big band swing seep into him. When he thought he could do it without dropping the glass he poured another whisky, draining it in one smooth gulp.

It was a long time before he felt even close to calm. He went back to the laptop, looking for answers, but the *comms* were down. He couldn't even find the article he had been reading in the history.

He banged the table in frustration.

Something thumped on the door in reply.

Fuck off. Just fuck off!

He waited. There was no repeat of the banging on the door. Glenn Miller's band kept swinging.

So what now?

Jim turned out the light and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He stepped slowly over to the small window by the door and looked out.

Twelve seals sat barely fifteen feet away, each as long as a man, and nearly twice as heavy. They all had their heads raised into the teeming rain, and all had their jaws wide open showing mouths full of yellow dog-like teeth. Even above the swing band he heard the chant rise up.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

As he turned away from the window, he spotted something else he had forgotten. A small box was nailed to the wall beside the door. Inside lay a flare gun, and two flares.

His hands shook as he loaded the first.

He took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Fuck off," he shouted. "Just fuck off."

Even as he raised the flare gun the seal he had aimed at *swelled* and grew. It rose up, tall as a man. Its body *morphed* until it looked like a large hefty robed figure, a cowl covering its head.

Jim pulled the trigger and the flare hissed through the rain and embedded itself in the shadows where the face would have been. The flare *blazed*, orange and yellow that stayed behind his eyelids when he blinked. The figure fell away, burning, into the rough water below the jetty. Jim slammed the door shut and headed for the whisky, emptying the best part of the bottle before stopping, breathless.

He moved to switch the light on, then realized he could see quite clearly. A shimmering blue glow filled the window.

It's coming from out on the jetty.

He couldn't help himself. He went back to the window and looked out.

They were no longer seals. They stood tall in two ranks, one of six, one of five, on either side of the jetty. The shimmering blue light rose from the *thing* that was hauling itself out of the sea.

It looked like nothing less than a bloated white maggot, but a maggot that was nearly thirty feet long. The blue light came from a vast maw that gaped and pulsed as it drew itself up the jetty.

Jim fumbled with another flare and took three tries before he got it loaded.

The chanting outside rose again, loud enough to drown out the radio.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

He threw the door open again.

"I told you already. Fuck off."

He fired the flare straight at the pulsing mouth of the *maggot.*

The mouth opened wide and the flare disappeared inside, immediately snuffed out.

Rorate caeli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.

Peccavimus, et facti sumus tamquam immundus nos, et cecidimus quasi folium universi.

Jim was suddenly struck immobile. He *wanted* to turn and run, to slam the door behind him and look for more booze. But the blue light surrounded him and held him as tight as if he'd been chained.

His legs started to obey someone else's orders. He stepped out into the storm.

The chanting immediately got louder and more urgent. He translated it in his mind, even as his throat started to articulate the sounds.

Drop down dew ye heavens from above, and let the clouds rain the Just One.

As he stood finally in front of the *maggot*, legs starting to melt

and fuse, teeth growing in a mouth that was suddenly too small, he knew.

One of the twelve had been taken.

A replacement was needed.

It is only just.

In the Spring

Why won't they just go away and leave me alone? she thought, but didn't say. That would be impolite.

All her life, all seventy eight years of it, she tried to live up to her standards - always be polite, never shout, always comport yourself with dignity. But sometimes it was hard. Especially when you son-in-law was of the opinion that old age meant you should be treated like a two year old; you were automatically deaf; and you were not to be trusted on your own.

He was at it again.

"John. Come away and leave your Gran alone. You'll tire her out."

As if she wasn't capable of a few minutes play with the boy. Hadn't she brought up three children of her own? And not the easy way either. They were always going on about how hard life was today. They didn't know the half of it.

Did they have to queue for hours - ration book in hand - just to get a couple of eggs? Did they have to walk home in the dark in fear that any light might bring a bomb down on their heads? Had they had to stand by helpless as their eldest son died of pneumonia through lack of medicines? She knew the answer to all of these.

But she mustn't complain. Her life had been easier than her mother's, which had been easier than her mother's before that, and so on, back to Roman times she supposed - it was they way of things, that was all. Sometimes she wished that the way of things was a bit more exciting, that she could tell them all just to go away, that she could leave everything behind and go, just go somewhere, anywhere, apart from these few square miles which had bound her whole life.

She realized that Dick was looking down at her.

"Are you all right Gran?"

She wished he wouldn't call her that. It only made her feel even older.

"I'm all right" she said. "Don't fuss over me. I'm not a dog."

She saw the look he gave over his shoulder to his wife, eyes wide in amusement. She had to do something, otherwise she was going to scream in frustration.

"I'll just go and put the kettle on." She said, pushing herself out of the chair.

"No, don't worry mum, we're just leaving," her daughter responded.

She tried not to show her relief.

There was a flurry of coats and handbags and umbrellas were

found, a brief wetness at her cheek as she was kissed goodbye, and then they were gone, leaving her alone once more.

She was always guilty about the relief she felt when they left. They were her only family, and you were supposed to feel happy when they came to visit, but recently she just wanted to be left alone. Too many people had been fussing over her - the butcher who insisted that her meals would be delivered to save her the walk into town; the postman who always waited until she answered the door just to make sure she was OK; the doctor who always called twice a week. It wasn't as if she was an invalid - it had only been a little fall. She hadn't even broken any bones.

Ever since he had found her at the foot of the stairs Dick had been trying to get her to move down to the town to stay with them. She'd refused point blank, and he couldn't understand why she'd been so angry.

She had been born in this house, her mother had been born in this house, and she wasn't going to leave it, no matter how much she might want to. She had her duty and she wouldn't leave. Not until they came to take her out in a box.

Nestling back in the armchair she looked around the room - the clutter of a long life surrounding her, pride of place taken by her wedding photograph. Tears welled up in her eyes as she started to fall asleep, dreaming of John and the long years which separated them.

She woke, bleary and tired and stiff, still sitting in the armchair. The light above her shone hard and bright in her eyes as she struggled to sit upright. Outside all was quiet and the clock on the mantelpiece told her that it was past four o'clock in the morning. The noise - the same one that had woken her - came again; a rustling and crackling from just beyond her kitchen door. Groaning, feeling the old age which had settled into her bones, she pushed herself out of the chair, teetering unsteadily at first as the blood rushed back to her legs causing them to tingle and tremble before she was finally steady. The noise came again as she headed for the door.

The kitchen lay in darkness, only a stray shaft of moonlight illuminating a piece of faded linoleum. Outside the door there was only a wall of silvery blackness. She couldn't make out any detail through the slightly warped glass, but as she peered something moved smoothly and silently behind the glass.

"Fox" she thought. Many times over the years she had watched them from her upstairs window, seeing them slinking through her garden as they stalked some small prey. They never ceased to bring a sense of wonder and a sense of jealousy. She envied them their freedom.

The old door handle rattled as she touched it, a small, almost

insignificant noise, but she knew it was enough to scare away anything that might have been there. She opened the door anyway, just in case.

The lawn stretched out before her, silver and grey in the moonlight. The beech tree overhanging the garden at the far end rustled slightly in a sudden breeze, but apart from that all else was still and quiet. She turned her back to go indoors and the noise came again, a whispering and a rasping and a cracking.

It was coming from under the hedge, over in the left hand seed bed. There was something there, something swaying in the stray moonbeams which made their way through the foliage. She tried to peer into the black shadows, but the night was too dark, and her eyes weren't what they used to be. She moved across the lawn, feeling the cold seep through her carpet slippers.

Where, the day before, there had only been dark brown earth, there was now a profusion of thin, silver shoots. The noise she had heard was their growing, thrusting themselves up through the soil, cracking as their leaves unfolded and stretched upwards for the moon.

She leaned forward for a closer look, seeing the silvery lightness of the leaves, the thin black veins. Her heart beat heavily in her chest, thudding its beat into her ears as she realized that these were not leaves, these were something new, something rich and strange, something wonderful. Her eyes shone in the moonlight as she stretched out a hand. and, just as her fingertips threatened to brush a shoot, the silence was broken by a laugh, a girlish giggle. The moon went behind a cloud, darkening the shadows and banishing the silver shoots into darkness.

She looked around, but the garden was all in blackness, all silver leeched away. She stood still, scarcely breathing, feeling the cold eat its way to her bones, but not wanting to move, afraid to break the spell.

And she was rewarded. The cloud moved on and the silver returned, spreading away from her across the lawn, hitting the beech and causing its branches to light up in a white, blinding, radiant skeleton. The laughter came again, but she was unable to pinpoint its source. She walked across the lawn, eyes fixed on the tree. Small shadowy buds had formed on the branches and, as she got closer, she could see them sprout, like in a time-lapse film, opening and blossoming into long, fine, diaphanous leaves which glowed with their own inner light.

And there, high up in the branches, a brighter light.

It was a boy, about ten years old, but like no boy she had ever seen. He sat, high in a fork in the tree. His silver hair fell in a long swathe to below his waist and his eyes sparkled like diamonds.

He seemed to be wearing a cloak made of tiny leaves and he glowed, silver and clear blue and white, all at once. She reached up a hand and was about to speak, but another cloud blocked out the moon and the scene faded into blackness.

Small tears of frustration welled up at the corners of her eyes. She did not notice that her legs had gone numb with the cold, not that she had no feeling in her fingertips. She waited, eyes raised to the clouds, waiting for a break in their sullen darkness, hoping and waiting.

The cold sank deeply into her, slowing her heart and thickening her blood until it thudded, slowed, then thudded, then slowed, barely reaching the extremities of her body.

And still she waited as the cloud hung heavy overhead. Time passed as she prayed for a wind, a breeze, the hand of God, anything to let the moon shine again. And, finally, she was answered.

The laughter began first, high and clear and beautiful, just as the darkness parted and the silver streamed through the garden in an explosion of blue and grey and silver and white. It was too much for her old eyes. She blinked, twice, and raised a hand to shade them from the glare, then stopped. Her hand was gray and white, radiating pale glimmers of moon dust.

She saw her veins pulsing darkly, saw the small crystalline diamonds of her skin writhe and dance in the cold night air. The cold finally took her and she fell backward, full length onto the glassy spikes of the lawn, her eyes full of stars.

She heard a movement; the padding of tiny feet, and she looked up into the face of the boy.

His eyes watched her, sad and lonely, as he stretched down and placed a feather light palm on her forehead, She felt the cold spread, slivers of ice piercing her brain.

Suddenly she knew what he wanted.

She strained her neck in order to lift her head, one last look at the house, her house that now sat dark and empty, a prison waiting in shadows. She looked up into the deep black eyes and saw a question.

She nodded, only once.

He pulled and she parted and now she was young again.

Two young people giggled and danced in the light of the moon as the first rays of dawn spread.

She had one last look back at the old thing she had left behind on the grass, but it was soon forgotten as they chased the darkness into the West.

The Dark Island

The sun was going down behind the mountain and the loch was fading from blue to black, the breeze throwing refraction patterns in intricate dances across its surface. Later the moon would dance in those patterns, but for now there was only blackness.

There was still over an hour till nightfall, but already there was a chill in the air, a portent of the winter yet to come. The trees rustled softly, and occasionally a leaf fell to swim in the ripples for a while before softly sinking to join its decaying brothers.

Far out over the water, a deeper blackness in the gloom, the island sat like a blot on the water. Until now I had paid it little attention, but I found myself trying to pierce its dark secrets. Despite my best efforts the night kept it hidden from me and I had only the memory of the passage from that last fearful tome to remind me of the taint it threw on the waters of the loch.

From my vantage point on the balcony I watched the patterns in the water, trying to instil some meaning to order my thoughts. My body was remembering the relative warmth of the library and goosebumps ran over my arms. I was going to need a jacket sooner rather than later, but my discovery had thrown all such thoughts out of my mind.

I needed to talk to someone, to share my bewildered thoughts, but Mrs Jameson, the housekeeper, had long since closed up for the night, the remainder of the staff were abed and Sir John wasn't due back till the morning.

The house was dark and quiet behind me. I knew that a fire was burning in my bedroom, keeping a small spot warm just for me, but from out here on the balcony the house was as cold and bleak as the surrounding countryside. How Sir John coped with the solitude I could never fathom.

"Come down for the week," he had said. "I believe Grandfather's library has a good deal of that esoteric waffle that you find so interesting."

We were in his club in Pall Mall, all elegance and leather and, yes, warmth.

At the time I believed that it was a plea for company - for someone to relieve the tedium of the duties forced upon him by a chain of unfortunate deaths that led to his inheritance.

Even then I was loath to leave London - I need the comforts of the city more than I like to admit, but then he mentioned, in his offhand way, the names of some of the books, and I knew that I had to take him up on his offer.

And when I got to his residence - a journey I pray I never have to repeat - I found that John was going to be away for three days, called to officiate in some provincial court. I almost turned at the door and left, but Mrs Jameson would have none of it.

She is one from that unbreakable mould of Scottish housekeepers; stout and broad with a bristling energy that is as hard to ignore as it is to deny.

Within ten minutes she had me sitting in her kitchen, a bowl of soup with enough gusto to feed a small army placed in front of me.

After that I had no desire to travel further than the comfort of an armchair, further fortified by some fine brandy and an even finer cigar.

"The maister telled me tae mak ye maist comfortable." Mrs Jameson said. "And I would no' be doing ma job if I did onything other."

After I recovered from her ministrations I headed for the library.

Sir John had underestimated the worth of his Grandfather's collection. There were early editions of Boehme and Paracelsus, but best of all, the jewel of them all, was the collection of the works of Michael Scott, that figure of legend, astrologer to Ferdinand II, consorter with demons and necromancer. Even my beloved Corpus Christi could not boast such a hoard of delights.

I settled myself in the library that very day - if I was to plunder its secrets in a week then I would have to apply myself.

And there I stayed for two whole days, leaving only for sustenance and sleep, fortified by more of Sir John's fine brandy.

As I worked I became aware of a presence among the works, a fine, legible hand that annotated and collated, a scholar who had, like me, been striving to make sense of an older, altogether different, philosophy.

The scribbles held pointers to other works on the shelves, cross references that expanded and illuminated. Soon the table at which I worked was groaning under the weight of the books and I had taken to utilising the floor space as I strived to bring the threads together.

It was on the evening of the second day that I realised I was being led towards a conclusion, the answer to a secret more than six hundred years old, a clue to the final resting place of Auld Michael himself.

I was puzzled when the final note in the volume I was studying pointed me to 'A History of the Earls of Kilbeith', but as soon as I took the book from the shelves I recognised the same, neat, handwriting to which I had become so accustomed.

It was then that I discovered the writer’s identity - it was none other than the 23rd Earl, Robert, Sir John's grandfather. The pointer

led me to a heavily annotated page near the beginning of the volume. As I read a chill seemed to work its way into my bones, a chill that has stayed with me ever since.

I have been searching for many years, and now I believe I have tracked down the source of that scourge which has so plagued my family down through the centuries. To understand it fully, it is necessary to go back to the early years of the thirteenth century. The first Earl, my ancestor, one Richard de Bourcy, raised the first castle on this spot, but it wasn't the first dwelling. At that time there was a chapel on the island on the loch - a small cell which was home to a local cleric whose name is lost to history.

It was while the castle was being raised that a stranger came to the chapel, an old, bent, man with silver in his hair and red fire in his eyes. Not long after that strange rumours spread across the region - rumours of a jet black steed with hoofs of iron that carried on its back an old man whose very gaze spelt death. The local country folk beseeched Sir Richard to rid them of this deviltry, and so it was that the Earl took himself to the island. And there on that accursed island his eyes met great abominations and outrages against good Christian nature which I will not detail here for fain of disturbing my reader's sensibilities.

And Sir Richard took up his sword against the perpetrator of the crimes, an old man with blood on his nails and at his mouth. Yet even as the old man was struck through the breast he uttered an almighty curse, that the Earl and all his family would be joined with him on the island before any of them should see fifty summers. The Earl razed the chapel to the ground, cleansing it with the pure fire of his faith, but that same faith failed to sustain him, and the next summer, just short of his fiftieth year, he passed from history, his resting place unknown. And so it has gone down the centuries, the old man's curse laying its foul hand over us all. I have tracked him down, the old devil, the necromancer Michael, and tonight I will go to the island and say the rites. If I succeed then the curse will be forever lifted. If I fail, I leave these notes so that one who follows me might see where I did not and, if his faith be strong, succeed where I could not.

By the hand of Robert, 23rd Earl of Kilbeith, in his 49th year in the sight of our Lord, in the sure and certain hope of his infinite mercy.

I laid the volume on the desk, noticing with horror that my hands were shaking, a tremble that I could not stop. It was then that I felt drawn to the balcony, but I did not stay there long, the dark and the cold soon sending me back to the relative warmth of the library.

But the room was no longer a comforting place to be, the books now enemies rather than trusted friends. I made sure that the windows were firmly locked and repaired to my bed.

Sleep would not come. Images flowed in my mind, of dark islands and warlocks, of swords and flames. Deep in that part of the night were nothing moves I heard, as if from far off, a loud drumming as of a horse in a wild gallop, but it was soon over and I was left, staring at the soft interplay of shadows on the ceiling. Dawn was washing the sky pale before a troubled slumber finally took me down and away.

I was awoken by the rattling of the doorknob in its casing, followed by the entry of Mrs Jameson.

"A guid morning to ye sir," she said, laying before me a tray of food that would have sunk the trustiest battleship. "The maister has sent word that he'll return after lunch, and asks that ye forgive his further absence."

She didn't wait for a reply. The door slammed behind her as if to punctuate her exit, and I was left staring with dismay at the mound of food before me.

I managed a single cup of tea and two spoonfuls of porridge before my troubled thoughts drove me from my bed and out into the cool morning where I thought that a brisk walk might bring a clearer view on my discoveries of the previous night.

For the first time I had a view of my old friend's estate, but I'm afraid that the panoramic splendours passed me by. From all vantage points I found my gaze drawn back to the loch and to the dark island at its heart.

By the time I headed back to the castle the sun had already passed overhead, or as near to overhead as it ever gets this far north. When I entered I found John in the hall, a brace of fine plump pheasants in his hands.

"William. I’m so glad you could make it," he said, and the warmth of his welcome almost dispelled the deep chill inside me.

"Do you believe it?" he said, "I sit in trial of a poacher, find him unjustly accused, and what do you think he does? Only gives me a pair of my own birds in gratitude."

He laughed, his head thrown back, showing off the proud roman profile enjoyed by all his family. The laugh was such a joyous thing that I was forced to join him. Five minutes later we were ensconced in his study, sharing a bottle of clear, golden, whisky, watched over by the imperious portraits of his ancestors. I couldn't help but notice that they had all been caught as young men.

John was full of tales from the courts, completely enthralled in the life of the people in the area, and for the first time in our long acquaintance he looked truly happy and at ease with the world.

I was loath to break the spell that this place had woven around him, and it took two glasses of whisky to loosen my tongue, and a

further one before I could relate my findings. I was serious, and tried to impress the gravity of the situation on him. He listened intently, but his eyes told me that he didn't believe a word of it.

"I've heard parts of the tale before," he said, "We used to have an old gamekeeper here - Jim Callender. He was full of the old stories - how that man loved to hear himself talk. He tried to frighten my brother and I when we were little more than children."

"But come," he said, leaning forward and placing a hand on my knee, "Surely a sophisticated gentleman like yourself has not fallen for such old wives tales?"

Suddenly he seemed to come to a decision.

"Come on. I'll show you that there's no need to be afraid."

He stood and made for the door before turning back to me.

"Well. Are you coming? There's just enough light for the task."

I took a last, lingering, drink before placing the glass on the table, and had a longing look back at it before following Sir John out to the loch.

There was a small rowing boat tied to a makeshift jetty, and John must have noticed the look on my face when I saw it.

"Don't worry," he said, "It's more stable than it looks. I take the boat out most evenings - there are some terrific trout in the waters around here."

Without another word he led me into the boat which swayed alarmingly until we were both settled. He had taken the oars and allowed me no argument. He rowed with the ease of one well used to the task, and was not even breathing heavily when he spoke.

"You know. It's a curious thing. I have been out on this loch more times than you can imagine, but I've never set foot on the island. Nobody has, for as long as I can remember."

"I'd wager that your grandfather did." I said, my mouth working faster than my brain. I immediately regretted it as a cloud seemed to pass over John's features.

"For pity's sake man - granddad was going soft in the head by all accounts. He was obsessed with the old stories. And it wasn't the curse that got him - he killed himself, up there in that library you are so fond of."

I jumped at that, causing the boat to sway slightly, but John didn't miss a stroke, and his face was now set against me. I could do no more than watch that dark blot appear ever closer over his left shoulder.

It was less than five minutes later when there was a grind of wood against stone and the boat came up on a steep, rocky shore.

The sun was closing in on the mountain side, laying layers of orange and red across the sky. The loch itself glowed gold like the

whisky I was missing so much, a gold that was slowly turning blood red.

I turned away from the view and forced myself to confront the island itself. At first it was no more than a larger smudge of darkness but then the splendour of the sunset faded from my eyes and the island asserted itself in my view.

It was smaller than I had thought - barely thirty yards in diameter, raising itself no more than six feet from the surface of the loch at its highest point. A grove of twisted yew trees seemed to grow straight from the rock, so dense that it was impossible to guess what might lie beyond them.

John was already up and out of the boat before I had time to take in the whole scene. Even then I found that I no longer had the desire to explore this god forsaken patch of land. I watched him scramble across the slimy rocks and followed his progress until his shape melded with the greater darkness of the trees.

A stillness descended around me like a shroud, the loch around me as flat and calm as the surface of a lady's mirror. No bird sang, nor did any of the fabled trout disturb the waters. Suddenly I felt more alone then I ever desired.

I called out to John, twice, my first attempt coming to little more than the thin, croaky, pleading of an old man. There was no reply.

I pushed myself out of the boat, the soaking of my good brogues not improving my temper. I was glad of them only seconds later - the rocks proved a more tortuous route than I had imagined.

Once more I called out for my friend, and this time was rewarded by an answering call, muffled, as if having travelled a great distance to reach me.

"Over here William" the voice said, and my heart immediately lifted. I followed the source of the voice to the grove of elms and began to push my way through them, all the time becoming ever more aware that darkness was beginning to draw itself in around me.

Just when I began to believe that the grove had, somehow, become larger than the island on which it stood, I emerged into a rough clearing, no more than nine feet across. The ground rose to a taller mound, one formed of fallen rocks and rubble, rubble that seemed strangely black, even in the dim light.

"John?" I shouted, and this time I could trace the reply - he was in the mound itself. As I stepped closer I could see a rough entrance, just above and to the left of where I was standing.

"In here" the voice said.

I stepped closer, then stopped, halted by a sudden whiff of corruption. There was a scrape, as of stone on stone, and the caustic

odour strengthened. I started to call out, but everything was driven from my mind when John screamed - a cry the like of which I hope never to hear again.

A figure barrelled out of the mound, knocking me over to scrabble, dazed, amongst the rubble. I managed to push myself upright just in time to see John's stout frame push away from me through the yews.

The stones beneath my feet shifted and the smell became so strong as to sting at the back of my throat and cause gorge to rise. It was all the excuse I needed - I hurried to follow my friend.

At first I thought that he had already gone, leaving me to go insane on this rough rock, but then I saw that the boat was still where we had left it. I came across his prone body several steps later - by that time it was becoming so dark that I might have missed him if I had passed several steps to either side.

He had fallen victim to the rocks, losing his footing and striking his head hard. There was a warm wetness in his hair, but his breathing was strong. With no little difficulty I managed to manhandle him into the boat - I still have a scar on my left knee where a rock sheared clean through my tweeds and into my leg.

I only looked up once, no more than a glance back to the island to get my bearings, and then I was rowing, with an energy I never knew I possessed, rowing with all haste back to the safe, warm lights of Sir John's ancestral seat.

I will say nothing of that mad flight across the loch - the fears and terrors of it have been blanked from my mind, a necessity if I am to remain sane.

Some time later Mrs Jameson met us on the doorstep. The walk from the jetty, all the while carrying the dead weight of my friend, almost exhausted me and I fell across the door, tumbling both myself and the master of the house in an unruly heap on the carpet.

By that time I was most willing to give myself over to the ministrations of Mrs Jameson. She did not let me down. Within five minutes we were installed in the stout armchairs in the study, the whole household having been roused for our attention.

Which is how I came to be facing John on his awakening.

His eyes opened first; strange, unfamiliar, red-rimmed orbs. He stared at me then his gaze lifted, looking beyond me to the portraits on the walls.

That's when the screaming started.

I left that very night, ignoring all of Mrs Jameson's protestations, and since that night I have never left London. Indeed, I rarely set foot from the safety of my warm, suburban home.

But at night I dream.

I am once more back in that rowing boat, having managed to tumble John into position. I pick up the oars and look back, just a glance to get my bearings.

And there, backlit by the last rays of the dying sun, I see a group of figures proceeding towards us, their bare feet shuffling among the hard rocks, tattered clothing flapping about their flanks. One bends and lifts a rock from the shore, and I see the red of John's blood appear at its mouth. And as the boat begins to drift away from the shore one of my oars strikes a rock, and the figures all turn towards me.

I wake screaming at the sight of those proud roman profiles, the same profile I see adorning the face of my friend Sir John, my good friend Sir John who will be fifty in less than two months time.

Too Many

The room was white, a brilliant white that almost hurt her eyes as she struggled to focus. Something was wrong. The last thing Sheila Davidson remembered was leaving the shop. She'd said goodnight to the assistant, walked to her car and…

And nothing.

She couldn't remember anything after that, until she woke sitting in front of a desk composed of a white marble that shone with its own inner light. She was transfixed, tilting her head from side to side to catch the glittering patterns of light and shade, and was only stopped in her reverie by a discreet cough from across the desk.

"When you're quite finished?" a deep gravelly voice said.

She looked up into a pair of piercing green eyes and a sardonic grin. The owner of the grin wore a sharp business suit and an expensive Italian silk tie. The gold band of a watch gleamed as he rolled a hand over the computer keyboard in front of him. Sheila was so taken with the suit that it took her several seconds to notice the talons… and the horns.

She threw herself back in her seat with a scream, and came up hard against the wall of the room. She searched frantically for a door, but there was none, just blank, featureless white.

The demon smiled at her again.

"If you'd just take a seat miss, this won't take too long."

"Where… where am I?" Sheila whispered.

The demon tapped at a badge on the lapel of his suit. Sheila had to stand and move closer to read it.

It read, *Ballygrampus, Assistant Deputy Demon, Substation 3933 level 46, Hell.*

"Hell?" Sheila whispered.

"What, you were expecting Pearly Gates and mellow fruitfulness?"

She sat down, hard. She pinched her forearm, so tight as to bring a flare of pain, but when she looked up, the demon still sat there, smiling.

"So, what was it? Accident? Heart attack?" the demon asked.

She could only sit and stare. Every time she tried to speak, she failed to come up with a sensible sentence for this situation.

"Ah. Here it is," the demon said, reading from the screen. "Shelia Davidson, aged forty-nine, heart attack. Unlucky not to reach the big 5-0."

"It's next month," Sheila whispered. "We're having a party… all the family will be there."

"I guess they will now," the demon said. "It's a pity *you* won't be there to see it. Let's see why they sent you to me, shall we?"

Sheila watched as the talons rattled across the keyboard.

"So far so good," Ballygrampus said. "Nothing for Fornication, nothing for Sloth, nothing for Envy."

He looked up and gave Sheila a wink.

"Looks like you might actually *have* come to the wrong place."

He went back to looking at the screen.

"Nothing for Pride, nothing for Avarice."

The demon looked up again, and this time it was more a smirk than a grin that crossed his face.

"That just leaves Theft and Gluttony. Want to guess where you stand? I'll bet you five years that it's Theft."

The demon pulled back his sleeves revealing a line of red, almost burnt, flesh, as he turned once more to the keyboard.

"You weren't a bureaucrat were you? We love them down here. They come in very handy with the filing."

"No," Sheila said in a whisper. "I am… was… a housewife. Just a housewife."

"Ahhh," Ballygrampus said, and smiled again. Thin wisps of smoke came out of his ears. "It'll be Gluttony then."

Sheila spluttered.

"I've looked after my body! I'm very careful"

"I noticed," Ballygrampus laughed. "But there is more than one kind of gluttony."

Smoke came out of his nostrils.

"Let's just see."

The demon's eyes burned with a gold flame as page after page of information scrolled up the screen.

"Here's the first… December 29th 1973, 12.30 PM… two pairs of platform gold lame boots… never worn."

The demon laughed again, but this time it was a cold hard thing, and the hackles at the back of Sheila's neck began to rise.

"January 2nd 1983. Twelve pairs of sandals - in a day? You must have been kind of desperate."

Sheila didn't get a chance to reply

The demon recited every single piece of shoe shopping activity in her life.

"March 15th 1987 2 PM, two pairs of strappy heels at 2:30 PM, and a pair of Cuban heeled Cowboy boots at 5 PM. I think we're beginning to see a pattern here."

The demon punched several keys, and his eyes blazed as the result came up.

"Two thousand, two hundred and thirty three counts of

Gluttony. Congratulations, I think you've got the record."

Talons rattled on keys as another screen came up.

"The going rate is a week for each offence. I'm sorry about that, but there are so many of you around these days that we've had to get tough on you. I make that forty-three years, give or take a week. Minus the five I owe you, that makes thirty-eight years. Have a nice day."

Sheila blinked… and looked out over the largest shoe store she'd ever seen.

"Well… *this* isn't too bad," she whispered.

After a while she spotted a pair of red stilletoes that would look just right with her new dress.

She put them on and paraded in front of a mirror.

"Oh, I *must* have these," she said.

They pinched a bit around the toes, and, if truth be told were just starting to hurt at the ankle.

She bent to take them off… only to find that they had become molded onto her feet, the skin already growing in thick folds over the shoes. The pain grew to a hot flaring like a needle being thrust into her ankle again, and again.

She tore frantically at the shoes, but there was no way to remove them.

Somewhere, a demon spoke.

"Thirty-seven years, three hundred and sixty four days, and twenty-three hours."

Sheila started to scream.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're looking for a taster of my work, this is who I am. These seven short stories, all previously published in magazines or anthologies, contain magic, monsters, ghosts, history, beer, Scotland, scifi, fantasy, horror, singing, more beer and fun.

This is who I am.

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